



OLD RELIGION, NEW ROCK: CHURCH OF THE LIVING DEAD PULLS IN ALT-CHRISTIANS FROM THE FRINGES

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OLD ORCHARD BEACH – On this particular Sunday morning, members of Andrew Hemstrought’s congregation aren’t surprised to see fingerless gloves (cut-off in punk rock style) on their pastor’s hands as he flips through his time-worn gold leaf Bible. His army dog tags, the striped stocking cap, the cargo pants, the cowboy boots—none of this comes as a shock to those who worship at the Church of the Living Dead.

They come to the community center on Sundays for the look, the feel, the sound, the freedom, and the release of rock and roll—blended with a healthy dose of their old time religion. What this small congregations finds is a five person alt rock band with a ZZ Top influence, electric guitars, African drums, and the egalitarian open microphone, allowing anyone to stand up and preach a little bit of their own faith.

Andrew and his wife, Sharon – an eye-catching brunette with a yellow flower in her hair, and a bright red polka dotted top – are charismatic enough to front any musical act. But they say that the service they began three years ago (as a Friday night event, which morphed into a more formal Sunday morning service last year) was meant to inspire the sort of worship that Christians won’t find anywhere else in the area.

“It attracts the people who don’t fit in the box of normal Christianity. They’re on the edge,” Andrew says. “We don’t want to be a box that nobody goes to. I don’t want to go to the box, do you? I’d rather sleep in.”

Those brave, or inquisitive, enough to get past the peculiar name won’t find anyone in zombie costume.

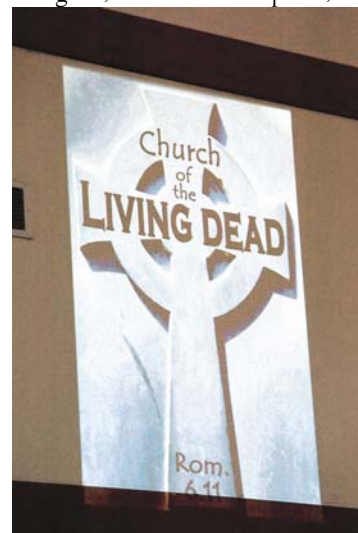
“In my thinking, I thought, ‘People are going to come thinking that it’s goth, or to test the spirits, or just out of curiosity, and I like that,’” said one 62 year old woman, who asked not to be named as she still hadn’t informed her former pastor that she’d cut ties with her old church.

Many are likely to find that the service, held in the public building of a summer camp, is a good deal tamer than they may have expected. In fact, “It’s still not edgy enough for me,” Andrew laughs. For him, the tendency to create organized programs and structured rules for the congregation is a big no-no. He tries to run with as little organization as possible—relying, instead, on the individual creativity of the congregation, and whatever initiatives bubble up out of it. At this point, he has no formal plans for church growth.

“For that reason,” he said, “We do attract a lot of strange people. We like to bring in people who are a little over the edge, because then, at least, they’re hungry.”

The soul food they get at the Living Dead is a theology that – like other evangelical churches that have sprung up across Southern Maine – is heavily influenced by Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity.

They believe in the Bible as the authoritative source of all matters, they have a personal relationship with God and Jesus (calling on them as father and brother), and they revel openly in the Holy Spirit—holding their hands in the air, like spiritual antennae, during the service.



Although Andrew studied at the Rhema Bible School in Broken Arrow, OK – which adheres to Charismatic philosophies - he describes the church as non-denominational, and many in his congregation would agree. Julia Duchaine is a former Catholic who says – adding that she means no disrespect – that other churches just didn't have what she was looking for.

For her, it's not even so much about the rock and roll. Or, if it is, it's because the rock and roll worship appeals to her deepest senses. It made her feel, she said, like God was alive in the space, when she walked in. And that's all she was looking for. "I wasn't looking for religion," she says. "I was looking for God."

Pastor Jeff Tarbox, who runs the New Life Christian Fellowship in Biddeford, says the growing evangelical base in Maine - and the rest of the nation - is made up of many Christians who are looking for something new, not the same old labels.

"People just stopped wanting to be characterized by denominational labels. They didn't choose churches that way," he says. "People didn't want to be 'branded' because each of those brands has their own associations. From the outside, people don't always understand the passion behind these things."

The appeal of rock and roll may be more compelling, for a certain demographic, than a denominational identity. The unconventional Living Dead worship, and philosophy, sound to Tarbox like churches he's seen in urban centers— places with a large population, and a built in diversity of belief systems. But this small church is a first for Southern Maine. Perhaps it's evidence that the new growth and development in Southern Maine isn't just tied to new shopping centers, and other commercial outlets. It affects the spiritual life of the community as well.

